

The Wrong Enemy: America in Afghanistan, 2001–2014

Carlotta Gall. (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014), 289 pp.

Reviewed by John H. Kavanagh

“We may be fighting the wrong enemy in the wrong country.”

—Richard C. Holbrooke,
former US Special Representative
to Afghanistan and Pakistan

New York Times reporter Carlotta Gall arrived in Afghanistan in November 2001, two months after the 9/11 attacks and one month after the onset of the US bombing and ground campaigns that quickly displaced the Taliban regime and decimated its ranks. Gall remained in-country for 10 years and was recently back in Kabul, reporting on the country’s recent presidential election. Given her nearly continuous presence, Gall serves as a valuable witness to the problematic, seemingly endless drama of America’s efforts to facilitate normalcy and promote democratic rule in Afghanistan.

Gall’s book, *The Wrong Enemy*, emphasizes the influence of a third player in the drama, Pakistan, arguing that since shortly after the Taliban’s 2001 rout, US attempts to bring order to Afghanistan’s political structure have been purposefully stymied by the machinations of Pakistan’s two most powerful entities, the army and ISI, the army’s Inter-services Intelligence Directorate, primarily by their reinvention of and relentless support to a resurgent Taliban. Gall offers two explanations for America’s frustration in Afghanistan: the difficulty of bringing to modernity an ethnically fractured society traditionally resistant to unity and the malignant subversion of that goal by a determined neighboring state.

Regarding the first issue, Gall wastes little time reviewing familiar ground. She does briefly note the “graveyard of empires” theme of various foreign powers serially failing to impose order or maintaining influence over the people of Afghanistan. Usually these efforts were based on attempts to dislodge the politically dominant Pashtun tribal sect of southern Afghanistan by sponsoring

cooperation by the rival Turkmen, Uzbek, and Tajik ethnic factions, a strategy that has never worked for long.

But Gall goes on to detail the post-9/11 search for a leader whose personal standing could earn the trust of each group and who could lead organized resistance to the expected renewed Taliban aggression. The Americans first reached back to Mujahedin commanders who had received CIA assistance in their successful 1980s guerilla war against occupying Soviet forces. One commander brought into play with CIA support was Abdul Haq, a legendary anti-communist warrior determined to organize a Pashtun alliance with northerners that would have led to a coalition government in Kabul.

Captured by a Taliban force near Kabul, Abdul Haq was executed on the orders of the Taliban’s Interior Minister, Mullah Abdul Razzak. One month earlier two al-Qa’ida operatives had assassinated Ahmad Shah Masoud, the fabled Lion of Panjshir, who effectively battled Russian forces for a decade. Gall notes, “Afghanistan had lost its best military commander in Massoud and its strongest advocate for national peace and reconciliation in Haq. The United States had lost its two best potential allies.”

The American search continued. It soon centered on Hamid Karzai, scion of a powerful Pashtun clan, educated, well-travelled, ambitious, and in Gall’s estimation much to his credit, willing to spend months in hiding from Taliban death squads, moving at night from village to village building support from tribal elders for the formation of the nascent coalition government he would lead into Kabul, arriving by American helicopter on 13 December 2001.

Gall encapsulates the subsequent and ongoing dysfunction of the Afghan government in terms of Karzai’s and his coterie’s personal shortcomings—corruption, nepotism, chronic short-sightedness, failure to exploit the opportunity to establish an appropriate consensus-based

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national agenda. Yet Gall allows that any legitimate effort to do so would have faltered under continuous external pressure from Pakistan.

Gall opens her argument by making the case that Pakistan's leaders since 9/11 have held to the illusory, ultimately self-destructive, hope that via ISI's management of the Taliban, a fragmented, violence-ridden Afghanistan would devolve into a malleable puppet, a strategic counterweight to archrival India's regional designs.

She then chronicles Pakistan's persistent intrusions into Afghan affairs, a program managed by senior ISI officers native to Pakistan's northwestern tribal agencies. There they are given to serving local agendas, defying Punjabi army commanders and government officials, and failing to prevent, if not giving rise, to the Taliban's spiraling, senseless violence against Pakistani villages and army units—a violence that has cast large swaths of northern Pakistan into chaos.

And while the United States depends on cooperation from Pakistan in joint counterterrorist efforts, ISI provides safehavens in the north for both the Taliban and al-Qa'ida units that launch cross-border raids in Afghanistan. And the program has been no less dangerous to its political sponsors. Nawaz Sharif was twice deposed from office by the army; Pervez Musharraf was deposed and upon return from exile, incarcerated; Benazir Bhutto, a critic of the army's untoward political meddling, was assassinated. Responsibility for her death is often ascribed to Musharraf, then chief of Army Staff who was at the time openly hostile toward Bhutto. The ISI effort has indeed effectively weakened Afghanistan, but it has done the same for Pakistan.

Gall's book provides a fast-paced, consistently readable take on Afghan developments from 9/11 to today. She plays a role in many of the story's telling anecdotes. Her condemnation of the army, ISI, and their works is heartfelt. A number of her friends and colleagues suffered, in some cases losing lives, from ISI-orchestrated violence. In 2006 Gall herself was seized in her Quetta hotel room by four plainclothes ISI officers, who detained and roughed her up and threatened worse if she continued to try to interview Taliban members.

Still, immersed in the region's troubled past and present, Gall remains hopeful for both countries' futures. The book closes with Gall's hope that Pakistan will accept its responsibility as a modern nuclear power and take up a supportive role in its neighbors' affairs and that the United States and other NATO governments will rededicate their efforts to leveraging Pakistan's proximity and stature into cooperative steps to help the Afghan people. Gall believes that must happen.

She isn't the only one. On 14 August 2014, former CIA Deputy Director of Operations Jack Devine addressed a meeting of the Association of Former American Intelligence Officers. He noted that, although Afghanistan was seemingly on the verge of tearing itself apart, the US effort against terrorism in South Asia could not succeed without a continued close relationship with Pakistan.

